

## Perspectives

# Service improvements in public services using SERVQUAL

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### Keywords

Service, Quality, Value, Improvement, Perception

### Abstract

This paper begins by explaining the new context in which public services are delivered and why improving service quality is especially relevant. The SERVQUAL model has been used in a number of public service environments to assess quality of service provision in terms of what consumers expect and what they actually receive. A particular advantage of SERVQUAL is that it is a tried and tested instrument which can be used comparatively for benchmarking purposes. The two service case examples featured in this paper illustrate the use of the SERVQUAL instrument to improve both process management and strategic planning in North Lanarkshire Council. Expectations, perceptions and gap scores are compared and their significance interpreted.

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## Introduction

Significant problems in the past have arisen from the tendency to compartmentalize management issues in general and approaches to quality management in particular. The “big picture” has as a result often been obscured. Strategic and operations management, for example, clearly involve different issues and methods but at some point they should be interlinked. Similarly, Total Quality Management has tended to be dissociated from strategic management. Value addition and a greater comprehension of these management approaches has therefore been lost.

Quality management has suffered historically from an apparent diversity of “unrelated” approaches, seen as distinct from one another and, in some instances, even as mutually exclusive. A salient example of this is the case of Total Quality Management and ISO 9000 systems and certification. Particularly in the service sector, more time was spent in the past on deciding which to tackle first or whether to tackle one or the other, rather than on achieving any real quality improvement. The learning curve has been a steep one and none the less so in the public service context.

A main aim of this paper is to begin to set the record straight, to point the way to a more complete understanding of how management of service improvement can become more logical and integrated. The pilot adoption of the SERVQUAL approach in two service areas of North Lanarkshire Council as both an operational process management and strategic planning tool provides an illustration of how integrated service improvement can yield immediate benefits and begin to clarify the “big picture”.

## The new public management

The need for change has driven initiatives in both the private and the public sector as pressure to improve performance has increased. In a recent report, KPMG (1997) identified the four factors driving change in the public sector as technology, customer expectations, the economy and organizational pressures. Hoggett (1996) and Hood (1991) have suggested that the response to demands for change in the public sector has generated a

new administrative philosophy known as the New Public Management (NPM). Hood (1991) attributes the rise of the NPM to two key elements:

- (1) The fact that it has been used as a means to restructure decision making in a range of organizations at the national and local government levels.
- (2) The NPM emphasizes more the concept of “better government” from a political perspective.

The key elements of the NPM include:

- accountability by hands-on professional managers;
- explicit standards and performance measures;
- an emphasis on results rather than on procedures;
- an emphasis on competition to improve productivity;
- private sector management styles with more performance-oriented reward schemes; and
- more enlightened financial management that uses resources efficiently rather than “spending up a given annual budget”.

While on the one hand, quality and customer responsiveness sit rather uncomfortably alongside a fierce and ever-present concern with economy and efficiency (Pollitt, 1993), the NPM does seek to offer more effective mechanisms for raising governmental performance levels, which would appear to be highly commendable and desired by all citizens (Kelly, 1998). The term “reinventing government” was in fact popularized by Gaebler and Osborne in 1993, who advocated that governments should adopt a more entrepreneurial management style and a more customer-sensitive approach to service delivery.

### **Quality management and the public sector**

Adapting quality management approaches to the public sector has not been particularly easy. Drucker (1980) identified some specific barriers to be overcome, such as:

- the lack of clear performance targets;
- the lack of an experimental attitude;
- the lack of evaluation in order to learn from experience; and
- a reluctance to abandon programmes.

Deming (1986) identified similar problems relating to both the private and public sector:

- the lack of vision;
- an emphasis on short term thinking;
- the negative effects of performance evaluations; and
- the increase of non value adding costs.

What is more, concerns have arisen about adapting quality to public services, especially as aspects of quality management such as Total Quality Management, ISO standards and audits and Quality Improvement Teams, were all applicable to the manufacturing rather than the service environment.

Questions have also been raised about the applicability of quality approaches to a non-market-driven or non-competitive environment where the consumer has no choice of supplier. This has now, however, changed as the public sector in the UK has moved towards a more competitive environment, beginning with the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering, which has evolved to become the Best Value Regime. Benchmarking and other comparative approaches in the public sector have helped to enhance commitment to improve quality, eliminate waste and reduce costs (Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1994).

There has also been much criticism regarding the relationship of government to citizen which must not be displaced by the government-to-customer paradigm, especially as most services provided by government involve complex trade-offs between competing interests (Mintzberg 1996). A balance between the “citizen” and the “customer” needs to be retained when public sector reform is considered.

As a whole, the public sector has been identified as more reluctant to embrace quality approaches such as Total Quality Management. The resourcing of public sector provision is not connected to performance, public sector managers are not rewarded for performance and are not free to control what they do in the way private sector managers are and overall there has been little incentive to improve. It is also important to ensure that any budgetary savings are not drained off and channelled elsewhere and that quality improvements do not pose a threat to staffing levels. Quality auditing was certainly perceived in its early days as a mechanism for reducing numbers of staff.

## Issues in local government

With an increasing emphasis on the contracting out of local public services and an increasing importance being given to the involvement of the consumer, there has emerged a corresponding interest in quality management (Freeman-Bell and Grover 1994). A further impetus to pursue quality has come from the Audit Commission, established by the Government to ensure the provision of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services, focusing on four key areas that together will contribute to quality in services (Audit Commission 1993):

- (1) *Quality of communication.* Does the council communicate with, listen to and understand service users?
- (2) *Quality of specification.* Is this understanding converted into clear standards for service delivery?
- (3) *Quality of delivery.* Are the standards actually delivered and is remedial action taken whenever a service failure occurs?
- (4) *Quality of people and systems.* Are staff motivated, trained, well managed and supported by good management processes and systems?

In order to implement these key elements of a quality system, adequate resources are required, used effectively and cost-efficiently, along with regular re-appraisal of services against these criteria.

In addition to the work by the Audit Commission, the Citizen's Charter in the UK provides guidance at national level to improve all public services, including those provided by local government. The charter includes statements about the nature of the community, the rights of people as citizens and specific service promises that individuals can expect to be fulfilled.

To emphasize further the importance of quality management in local government, local authority associations recognize the need for an annual survey of their members to document progress with quality initiatives. One of the authors was in fact involved in such a survey conducted by the Association of Direct Labour Organizations (ADLO) using the SERVQUAL approach.

The Best Value initiative replaced compulsory competitive tendering in 1997. It requires local authorities to publish performance plans with targets for service

improvement. Authorities are expected to meet the aspirations of local people for services that represent the highest quality and most effective delivery possible within the available resources.

### Best Value

Best Value is not just about economy and efficiency but also about effectiveness and quality of local services. Not only is the setting of targets and performance a key underpinning principle but a wider range of services should be covered than was the case with compulsory competitive tendering. There is, in fact, no presumption that services must be privatised and there are no general requirements for councils to put their services out to tender, but there is also no reason why services should be delivered directly if other more efficient means are available.

Competition continues to be an important management tool, a test of Best Value and an important feature in performance plans. It is not, however, by itself sufficient to demonstrate that Best Value is being achieved. Detailed local targets should relate to national targets and to performance indicators set by the Audit Commission to support comparative competition between authorities. Auditors should confirm comparability of performance information, will report publicly on whether Best Value has been achieved and should contribute constructively to plans for remedial action. Once measurable targets for improvement have been agreed, progress has to be reported against the agreed plan. There may be a need for intervention should an authority have failed to take remedial action or have failed to achieve realistic targets for improvement (Tichelar, 1997).

The key issues that Best Value focuses on are competition, performance targets and improvement in service provision.

### Service quality

It is very difficult to come to a consensus as to a definition of service quality, but we can conclude from the perspectives of different authors that it is about providing something intangible in a way that pleases the consumer and that preferably gives some value to that consumer. Zeithaml *et al.* (1990) consider customers to be the sole judge of service

quality. Edvardsen *et al.* (1994) claim that service quality has only become an established discipline in the last ten to 15 years and much of the related research has tended to be focused on the private rather than the public sector. Given, however, the agendas of the New Public Management and Best Value, there is now some comparability between these two sectors.

There is no consensus on the appropriate level of service and the idea of excellent service quality implies that every customer is important and that all expectations should be met or exceeded. This, however, depends on whether or not customers' expectations are reasonable or not. What is immediately apparent is that customers are immediately and directly affected by service delivery mistakes (Bowen and Lawler, 1995). As for service improvements, Iacobucci *et al.* (1994) highlighted the importance of continual slow efforts to improve rather than a reckless mad dash to redefine business priorities and Edvardsen *et al.* (1994) claimed a basic problem with service provision is the difficulty of controlling how the service is provided and experienced. These statements lead to the conclusion that the service process must be designed in a way that allows little room for error. Carman (1990) states that one of the unique characteristics of service is the need to monitor customer perceptions of satisfaction and quality in the service setting.

So, why should service quality be measured? Measurement allows for comparison before and after changes, for the location of quality-related problems and for the establishment of clear standards for service delivery.

Galileo Galilei, said:

What can be measured can be improved . . .  
Count what is countable, measure what is measurable and what is not measurable make measurable.

Ramaswami (1996) operates with a service design and management model where step six is to measure performance. Edvardsen *et al.* (1994) state that, in their experience, the starting point in developing quality in services is analysis and measurement. There are, however, caveats to service measurement that have to be borne in mind. The measurement systems themselves are often inappropriate because the system designers do not know enough about what is to be measured. Measuring customer perceptions of service may increase expectations and measuring too

often may well result in customers losing their motivation to answer correctly. Finally, there is no point in measuring service quality if one is not willing to take appropriate action on the findings.

### Measuring service quality in local government

The main aim of Best Value is to produce customer-focused services, which will only be achieved successfully by consulting with the customer/stakeholder and thereby ensure local accountability and continuous improvement. Customers/stakeholders must be consulted on a regular basis and their expectations and service priorities translated in the service-planning process.

In the private sector, the definition of *who is the customer* is usually unambiguous. The *customer* of local government services may be an individual, a local community or interest group, one or more elected members, a government department or minister or society as a whole. A further complication comes from the recognition that not all customers pay for or receive the services in question (Dalrymple *et al.*, 1995; Donnelly *et al.*, 1995). There may also be a conflict between the interests of different customer groups, such as may arise when a planning application is made. With some public services the customer may either be unaware of the service provided or may not be a willing participant in the process, such as is the case with the prison and police services. The food safety service goes largely unnoticed by the general public until there is an outbreak of food poisoning, similarly when a prison riot occurs. The public's interests have to be maintained as a matter of priority, although this may not be explicit.

All in all, the definition of the customer in the public sector is more complex and potentially problematic than in the private sector. It may also be relevant to compare/contrast the views of different customer sets and this has, in fact, already been achieved in a number of research projects (see McNicol, 1997; Durden, 1997; Curry and Stark, 2000).

Many strategic and operational decisions affecting service quality are taken jointly by elected members and chief officials. Decision makers in the public sector are not free to make decisions in the same way as in the private sector. Some services are provided not by choice but by statute and there is no option

to retreat from provision of a particular service on the basis of market economies or lack of expertise.

Public sector decision makers need a ready tool for evaluating and prioritising changes in current service quality. There are, however, significant issues relating to the complexity of objectives, service delivery mechanisms and the public sector environment generally, that make the application of a tool such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985) more difficult, as the tool was originally designed for and tested in the private sector. It is nonetheless clear from research to date (see Curry and Herbert, 1998; Curry, 1999) that SERVQUAL can be applied in the public sector provided that the instrument is appropriately tailored to the context in which it is to be applied and *the customer* is clearly defined *ab initio*. SERVQUAL does, however, benefit from being a statistically valid instrument as a result of extensive field testing and refinement. It therefore escapes the pitfall of being perceived by service users and providers as “something that has been invented off the top of the head” or a questionnaire that has been skewed to elicit certain types of response. As a generic and universally-applicable instrument, SERVQUAL can also be administered on a repeated, regular basis and used for comparative benchmarking purposes.

### The research context

The Accounts Commission for Scotland's Performance Management and Planning Audit stipulates that all services must be designed and delivered around the expectations of the appropriate stakeholder groups. To ensure compliance to this and the sound governance element of Best Value, the North Lanarkshire Council Community Services Department proposed the use of the SERVQUAL model.

This particular measurement tool helps determine customer/stakeholder perceptions and expectations and any service quality gaps between the two. Knowing what the stakeholder expects is the first and key component in the delivery of a quality service and therefore provides a good starting point for initiating service reconfiguration and improvement. The SERVQUAL instrument is a statistically-tested tool that has been refined

by its authors over the years of field research in the private sector in the USA. The tool has been used quite extensively in the public sector in the UK and offers comparability between services and authorities. Its validity confers a measure of acceptability and it has been specifically designed to target the key dimensions of importance in service delivery. It has been applied to a number of services in the Community Services Department of North Lanarkshire Council, of which catering and grounds maintenance were the first research cases.

### Catering services

Catering services are provided to four principal sectors of the council's operations:

- (1) *Leisure services*. A variety of catering services are offered through leisure locations such as sports centres, country parks, museums, libraries, cultural centres and staff restaurant facilities. Catering services are provided to both internal and external customers of the North Lanarkshire Council, in major leisure venues and at a variety of locations for all types of functions, from formal banquets to high teas, weddings to conferences, barbecues, licensed bars and other refreshment services. Hospitality and retail catering are provided at events.
- (2) *Education*. A schools meals and refreshment service is provided to 170 primary, secondary and special schools throughout North Lanarkshire, with over 3.3 million meals provided annually.
- (3) *Social work*. Catering services are provided to the Social Work Department of North Lanarkshire, to homes for the elderly, children's homes, intermediate treatment centres, day centres and adult training centres. In addition, in excess of 150,000 meals for meals-on-wheels and lunch club services are produced annually. The service is committed to the development of healthy eating initiatives in North Lanarkshire – especially in schools – and a recently approved diet and nutrition policy is now being implemented. This will provide strategic direction for catering services for the foreseeable future.
- (4) *Service development and review sections*. As the Department of Community Services client representatives, this section is responsible for reviewing existing services

and developing new ones in accordance with the council's Best Value strategy. It is also responsible for project development, food safety assessment, service plans, service development strategies, research and analysis, benchmarking, service specification and policy. It also manages the milk subsidy claims, the monitoring of maintenance contracts, repairs and inventory.

### Grounds maintenance service

The customers of this service are effectively all internal, consisting of sections within the Community Services Department (country parks, sports operations, community centres, libraries, museums and community education) and other council departments (education, housing, roads, transport, administration, construction and planning and development).

### Customer classification

As already stated, it tends to be difficult to classify the term "customer" when thinking about local authority services (Donnelly *et al.*, 1995). For the purpose of this particular research project, the SERVQUAL survey was targeted at internal customers in both services. In the case of catering services, the aim was to determine the quality of the catering service provided for meetings, courses and conferences. As for grounds maintenance, the aim was to survey those working directly or indirectly on the contract with grounds maintenance, property keepers and point-of-contact staff. Using education as an example, the people involved were contract officers, area officers, contract managers, janitors and head teachers.

### The research method

The SERVQUAL approach was designed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985), in response to the lack of conclusive published research material relating to the measurement of service quality. This resulted in both quantitative and qualitative research being conducted in the private sector, which consisted of customer research using focus groups and surveys. The findings of this research pinpointed a definition of service quality as the difference or gap between customers' perceptions and their expectations of a service and identified

ten dimensions which customers use to evaluate service quality.

As a result of further quantitative research, the ten dimensions of service quality were consolidated into five (as outlined below), and a 22-item survey instrument was constructed containing 22 perceptions and 22 expectations statements which are measured on a seven-point Likert scale.

- (1) *Tangibles*. Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials.
- (2) *Reliability*. Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- (3) *Responsiveness*. Willingness to help customers and provide a prompt service.
- (4) *Assurance*. Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
- (5) *Empathy*. Caring, individualised attention the service provides to its customers.

The perceptions statements are deducted from the expectations statements to give a service quality gap score (P – E).

The research approach also reveals the relative importance customers attach to each of the five individual dimensions, giving service providers an idea of how well they perform in each dimension, which is also a feature of the survey instrument. To achieve this, customers are asked to allocate a relative score out of 100, reflecting the importance of each of the five dimensions to them in the provision of service quality.

### Aims of the SERVQUAL approach

The SERVQUAL methodology evaluates and helps to determine the following:

- different customers' perceptions and expectations of service quality to highlight current performance levels, by customer segmentation;
- resultant service quality gaps;
- how important each of the service quality dimensions is to the customer, which assists in resource allocation and definition of action-planning priorities;
- an understanding of customer perceptions and expectations over time, allowing further analysis as part of the monitoring process;
- how to manage customer expectations with regard to service planning, design and delivery;

- the impact of service improvement activities carried out as a result of customer expectations and priorities;
- most importantly, the results that provide a starting point and assist in the prioritisation of service improvement activities.

### Design of the SERVQUAL instrument

It was important to customize the SERVQUAL instrument to fit the context of the catering and grounds maintenance services. This was achieved, first, by undertaking a customer complaints analysis and consulting other previous relevant surveys that had been conducted. The draft instrument for catering services was then reviewed by the service development and review staff and certain amendments were finally agreed, as follows:

- only three rather than four Empathy statements were used on account of restricted customer contact at the point-of-service delivery;
- a value-for-money statement was added at the end, which is not part of SERVQUAL itself. There is no doubt that expectations and perceptions relating to value for money need to be elicited, particularly in the existing public sector context, given the Best Value regime, and this has been highlighted in previous research work (Curry and Brysland, 1999; Curry, 1999).

In the case of grounds maintenance, the following amendments were made:

- fewer statements were included in the Assurance and Empathy dimensions owing to limited customer contact;
- three additional statements relating to important service issues were added at the end, which were not counted as part of SERVQUAL. These involved two statements on environmental impact and a statement relating to price.

In both cases, an additional label was inserted into the Lickert scale in the form of the word “Agree” relating to the mid-point 4 on the scale, staff having highlighted this change as useful for clarification purposes.

## The research findings

### Catering services

A total of 140 questionnaires were distributed to all of the previous year’s internal customers

and 52 useable questionnaires were returned, resulting in a 37 per cent response rate.

As can be seen from Table I, all questionnaire responses were negative and an overall departmental weighted SERVQUAL score of – 1.6 was recorded, indicating a significant shortfall in meeting customer expectations across all service areas and dimensions.

The summary scores for each dimension are shown in Table I, with the weighted average scores per dimension having been totalled to achieve the overall SERVQUAL score.

As can be seen from Table I, the highest gap scores were for Reliability and Responsiveness; this is real cause for concern and provides a definite starting point for service improvements. As can be seen from the results, the customer expects most from the Reliability dimension of the catering service.

The relatively low importance of Tangibles could be attributable to the fact that customers are aware of the financial constraints which are typical in the local authority funding context, and simply do not expect much when it comes to aesthetics; instead, they attach more importance to the delivery aspects of the service.

Customers allocated to Assurance the lowest weighting, indicating it to be of least importance to them, yet they expect most from this service dimension. This apparent anomaly is probably due to the fact that customers expect staff to be knowledgeable about the service and therefore they can see no reason for this dimension not to be achieved. It is assumed that for this reason customers have weighted this dimension lowest.

### Individual statement results

Each individual statement was analysed in terms of perceptions, expectations and service quality gap scores. The following issues have been highlighted as worthy of note:

- *Tangibles*. Statement 5 : “A good standard of food quality” had the highest expectations and gap score of all of the five service quality dimensions, with the gap score substantially exceeding – 2.0, and currently giving a score of – 2.31; whereas Statement 1: “The presentation of table settings” received particularly low expectations and gap scores.

Table I SERVQUAL scores for catering services

Dimension	Expectations	Perceptions	Gap scores	Weightings	Weighted average
Tangibles	5.66	4.26	- 1.40	19.8	- 0.28
Reliability	6.06	4.36	- 1.70	29.6	- 0.5
Responsiveness	5.74	4.05	- 1.69	19.9	- 0.34
Assurance	6.13	4.58	- 1.55	15.2	- 0.24
Empathy	5.97	4.45	- 1.52	15.7	- 0.24

**Note:** Overall average weighted SERVQUAL score = - 1.6

- *Reliability*. Statement 18: “Getting what you ordered” had the second highest expectations score of all of the service quality dimensions. Statement 9: “Delivery at the time requested” had the third highest expectations score, while Statement 4: “Services accurately described in promotional literature” received a particularly low expectations score. Statement 6 and Statement 9: “Delivery at the time requested” and “Consistency of service”, both had a gap score exceeding - 2.0 and relatively high expectations scores.
- *Responsiveness*. Statement 11: “Customers’ problems are resolved as quickly as possible” had the highest expectations and gap scores, whereas Statement 17: “Gives the customer the opportunity to make suggestions” received the lowest expectations and gap scores.
- *Assurance*. Statement 19: “Consistently courteous staff” and Statement 20: “Adequately trained staff to meet the needs of the customer” had the same and highest expectations score of 6.21. Statement 20 had the highest gap score.
- *Empathy*. Statement 7: “The quantity of food is sufficient to meet your needs” had the highest expectations score and the largest gap score in this dimension, while Statement 21: “Understand the needs of specific customers” received the lowest expectations score.
- *Value for money*. The value for money score was not an integral part of the SERVQUAL instrument or analysis. It does, however, give an indication of customers’ perceptions and expectations of value for money. They clearly had particularly high expectations with regard to value for money, and the gap score was in fact higher than that recorded in any of the five service dimensions.

### Grounds maintenance service

A total of 380 questionnaires were distributed to the entire customer base and 183 were returned, resulting in a 48 per cent response rate.

All the weighted SERVQUAL gap scores were once more negative (see Table II) with an overall average weighted SERVQUAL score of - 1.64 being recorded, indicating another significant shortfall in meeting customers’ expectations across all service areas. As can be seen from Table II, the highest gap score was for Reliability, a definite target for future service improvements. The gap score for Assurance was noticeably lower, in spite of its expectations score being the highest.

Customers expect the most from the Responsiveness and Assurance dimensions of service, although the relative importance weightings allocated to them respectively do not reflect this. Similarly, with the case of catering services, this is probably attributable to the fact that internal customers are all aware of financial restrictions imposed on all service providers and tend to take for granted the knowledge and willingness of fellow staff trying to do a good job.

On the whole, though, expectations were not high. Scores in excess of 6 have been more commonly recorded in research to date (see Curry and Stark, 2000). The expectations score for Tangibles was the lowest, but the importance weighting attached to this service dimension was high, coming second only to Reliability. This is probably due to the fact that customer evaluation of service quality will tend to be based on first impressions and whether or not the maintained area is visually appealing. Reliability is clearly important; if services are not delivered on time and consistently, then, for example, woodland areas will be obviously untidy and sports pitches unplayable, hence defeating the whole rationale for the service.

Table II SERVQUAL scores for the grounds maintenance service

Dimension	Expectations	Perceptions	Gap scores	Weightings	Weighted average
Tangibles	5.67	4.04	– 1.63	25	– 0.41
Reliability	5.86	4.08	– 1.78	28	– 0.5
Responsiveness	5.91	4.27	– 1.64	17	– 0.28
Assurance	5.99	4.67	– 1.32	15	– 0.2
Empathy	5.77	4.13	– 1.64	15	– 0.25

Notes: Overall average weighted SERVQUAL score = – 1.64

### Individual statement results

Once more, individual statements were analysed and the following points are worth mentioning:

- *Tangibles*. Statement 1: “Maintained woodland areas are kept neat and tidy” had the lowest expectations score in this dimension and a relatively low gap score, while Statement 2: “Maintained open spaces are kept neat and tidy” received the highest expectations score. Statement 4: “Staff uniforms are recognizable” had the highest perceptions score and lowest gap score. Statement 5: “Information on services provided is readily available to you” had the highest service quality gap score in this dimension, in excess of – 2.0.
- *Reliability*. Statement 7: “Work is carried out regularly enough for areas to be neat and tidy at all times” received the highest expectations score in this dimension and the highest gap score of all the statements in the survey, exceeding – 2.0. Statement 9: “Work is performed right first time” had the highest perceptions score of this dimension and consequently the lowest gap score. Reliability expectations scores were in fact quite similar.
- *Responsiveness*. Statement 11: “If additional work is required it can be easily requested” received the second highest expectations score and the highest gap score of the dimension, while Statement 12: “Complaints are resolved as quickly as possible” had the highest expectations score and the second highest gap score. Scores in this dimension were again very similar.
- *Assurance*. Statement 16: “Staff are aware of the safety aspects of the service provided” received the highest expectations score of all dimensions and the highest service quality gap score of this dimension. This is perhaps not surprising, considering the nature of the

service, involving the use of different machinery and working in dangerous areas.

- *Empathy*. Statement 10: “Staff understand customer requirements” received the highest expectations score of this dimension and also the highest service quality gap score.

Considering the different departments and sections, expectations were consistently high in education and housing. The assurance dimension received the highest expectations score from education and housing expected most from responsiveness, with highest gap scores recorded in reliability and responsiveness. Sports operations expected most from the responsiveness and empathy dimensions and least from the tangibles dimension. Community centres had the lowest gap score in the assurance dimension with gap scores consistently better than average. One notable gap score was that for Statement 3: “Facilities are well maintained”, which also had one of the highest expectations scores.

### Discussion

The concept of measuring the difference between expectations and perceptions in the form of the SERVQUAL gap score proved very useful for assessing current levels of service quality. There has been much debate and criticism of the measurement of expectations for a variety of reasons (Cronin and Taylor, 1994; Teas, 1994) but in both these case examples, expectations scores were realistic rather than artificially high. Comparison with perceptions scores was therefore more meaningful.

The resultant quality gaps obtained from this study will form the basis of future service developments and will aid in the prioritisation of service development for the forthcoming

year. As for the importance of the five service quality dimensions, this inevitably varies according to the service provided and consequently the number of statements applicable to each dimension may vary. In these cases, the services involved very little in the way of actual customer contact and there was therefore a requirement for fewer statements relating directly to certain people aspects, particularly in the Empathy, Responsiveness and Assurance dimensions. This study further confirms the need to tailor the SERVQUAL instrument to the environment in which it is being applied, not only in terms of wording of expectations and perceptions statements, but also in distribution of the statements (Curry, 1999).

Although the value-for-money statement is not part of the SERVQUAL instrument, this statement in the catering services survey received the highest gap score, and there is reasonable justification to assume that this issue is of the utmost importance to the public service customer. There is mounting justification for including it as an addendum if public sector service quality is to be realistically and thoroughly measured.

This particular study has indicated that SERVQUAL can be applied successfully to internal customers of local authority catering and grounds maintenance services; if services get the intra-organizational customer/supplier relationship right, this will help expedite service improvements and reconfiguration, with consequent benefits to end users of the service.

To appreciate more fully the benefits of using SERVQUAL, surveys should be conducted every year, for the following reasons:

- to allow yearly comparisons;
- to determine how service improvements have affected customers' perceptions and expectations of the service over time;
- to determine the effectiveness of service development and improvement initiatives in targeted dimensions.

The results generated from this research project have proved extremely useful in terms of the future design and prioritisation of service improvements.

With Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) the contractual relationship was generally transactional based, where policies were developed by the provider on a "what we can do" basis rather than on the basis of stakeholders' requirements. A new culture of

openness and consultation is required under a Best Value regime, whereby the emphasis is more on the forming of contractual relationships between the service provider and agent acting on behalf of the customer. This aids in the design of service specifications, which will ensure the provision of customer-focused services, a major theme of Best Value.

As a starting point, joint partnerships should be established with all client sections or departments. The objective is to share research results generated by the service review surveys and to form a plan of targeted improvement actions by consultation that will meet external customer requirements. The long-term relationship between the catering services and the grounds maintenance service and their customers is fostering the development of a mutual trust, and this will help ensure joint co-operation between the parties in their pursuit of a culture of Best Value.

### Some practical implications

Operational forces, as well as many other factors, have diverted the focus away from customers, thus reducing efforts to understand customer needs and expectations, which has contributed to the reason why all of the SERVQUAL results are negative.

Improvements are therefore required across all dimensions of service quality. From the results generated it is apparent that the priority for further investigation and service improvements should be targeted in the following areas for the catering services:

- "A good standard of food quality" has the highest expectations and gap scores. These expectations relate to the food product rather than the service. A customer's expectations and perceptions of the quality of food tend to be somewhat subjective, so it will be difficult to attain total satisfaction.
- Clearly, research should concentrate on the methods used by the catering services to choose certain food products in favour of others, and to look at the possibility of sourcing additional food suppliers.
- A vendor rating system and food-tasting panels are an effective method of determining customer expectations with regard to food quality, as well as regular food product reviews in collaboration with the customer.

- “Delivery at the time requested” and “consistency of service” both had a gap score exceeding – 2.0, and particularly high expectations scores. “Getting what you ordered” had the second highest service quality expectations score, so further investigations are required into the efficiency of the service in these areas of the Reliability dimension. It may be necessary for random inspections to be carried out to ensure the control of quality, on both an internal and external basis.
- It is understandable why expectations are so high for Statement 9: “Delivery at the time requested”, and Statement 18: “Getting what you ordered”, as these aspects of the internal catering service are crucial to its ultimate success.
- Further investigation into the value-for-money statement has shown that customers’ expectations and perceptions of this statement are skewed, as most customers are not really aware of the cost of the service. The fact, nonetheless, remains that details of the catering service should be made available to customers, whether charging is of an internal nature or not, to ensure transparency and accountability of the service to those customers.

Improvements in the following areas should be considered for the grounds maintenance service:

- It is important to review the frequency of work in the specification to ascertain whether this frequency complies with good land maintenance practice, customer requirements and seasonality.
- Staff need to have clear work instructions and these should be translated into procedures.
- All aspects of the service which affect dependable and accurate performance should be reviewed as a matter of some urgency.
- A service profile needs to be developed and a clear information leaflet detailing which services are provided needs to be produced.
- The current procedure for the requesting of additional work needs to be reviewed, particularly in terms of how long it takes between ordering the service and its actual delivery.

## Conclusion

The use of SERVQUAL in these two local authority case examples has served to throw into focus a number of issues, some of which have been debated in the past. The first area of focus is that of SERVQUAL itself as a measurement tool. There has been some useful corroboration of the value of comparing expectations and perceptions of service quality rather than concentrating on satisfaction levels alone. A more informed perspective on the totality of priority issues has emerged as a result. On the other hand, SERVQUAL does present certain difficulties in the public sector context and these have to be addressed. Apart from the obvious need to tailor both the wording and distribution of statements according to the service being evaluated, there are areas of public service concern that SERVQUAL has not been designed to tackle. In these case examples, statements relating to value for money, price and environmental impact had to be added into the respective survey instruments. The issue of *cost* has arisen previously (Curry, 1999) in the case of a building Direct Labour Organization. Naturally there is no question of considering such additions as part of SERVQUAL itself, but they will probably need to be included in the evaluation of similar services in the future. What has emerged quite clearly from the research undertaken at North Lanarkshire Council, is that SERVQUAL can, and probably should, be used as a strategic planning tool, as well as serving its purpose as an operational process management tool in the context of the European Business Excellence model (Curry, 1999).

The second area of interest is the importance of Reliability in service quality. Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) concluded from their research in private sector service organizations that reliability and consistency were what customers wanted most and this trend has been borne out by a number of research studies conducted in the public sector (see Table III).

Reliability tends to carry the highest ranking in terms of prioritisation among the five service dimensions. With this in mind, there is a need to establish the infrastructure in services to deliver consistency and dependability. There is a clear indication in both the case examples in this study that the

Table III Comparative public sector Servqual results

Dimension	NLC Grounds		Donnelly <i>et al.</i>	Donnelly Shui	PZB (1988)
	maintenance (1999)	NLC Catering (1999)	Public library service (1995)	Housing repair service (1999)	
Tangibles	25	20	18	16	11
Reliability	28	30	23	30	32
Responsiveness	17	20	22	21	22
Assurance	15	15	21	17	19
Empathy	15	15	17	16	16

implementation of BS EN ISO 9002 would help to provide greater consistency of service provision with more of a process orientation, procedures and work instructions. Services such as catering and grounds maintenance were in fact highlighted in previous research studies as ideal candidates for ISO 9000 registration (Curry and Monaghan, 1995). It is important that different tools and techniques in quality management become more integrated so that they serve each other. There is a definitive link between the importance of service reliability and the implementation of a quality management system such as ISO 9002 to help ensure that reliability. In the past there was a good deal of suspicion and misunderstanding of ISO 9000 among service organizations in general in the public sector context in particular, with consequent patchy development of quality systems for some selected services. Perhaps the time has now come to reconsider that development.

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